

Secret, High-Level Talks

U.S., Britain Consider Indian Ocean Bases

By Robert H. Estabrook
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LONDON, Aug. 28 — The United States and Britain are jointly exploring the possibility of a series of island bases in the Indian Ocean to reinforce security in South and Southeast Asia.

Unpublicized high-level discussions have concerned possible construction of an American naval communications facility on the British-owned island of Diego Garcia in the Chagos Archipelago about 1000 miles southwest of Ceylon.

Several other British-administered islands in the sweep of ocean bounded by the African coast, the Arabian peninsula and the Indian subcontinent are under con-

sideration for development as potential air and sea bases and as staging areas for the airlift of troops to trouble areas.

Among these are the Aldabra Islands off the east

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coast of Africa about 100 miles north of Madagascar. Additional islands in the Chagos Archipelago also are being explored.

Diego Garcia, however, is the most likely point for initial development. Funds are available for building a naval radio relay station there, al-

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though the island was not explicitly named in the bill.

A small group of American Navy officials aboard a British ship currently is conducting a survey of islands in the Indian Ocean.

Closely guarded negotiations have been going on here and in Washington between the State Department with Pentagon representation and the British Ministry of Defense and Colonial and Commonwealth Relations offices.

So sensitive have been the arrangements that tight security precautions were taken. However, word has leaked out in London.

Touchy Issue in U.N.

The issue of island bases has been regarded as especially touchy because of possible criticism by the United Nations colonialism subcommittee, which is heavily weighted with Asian and African members. Britain has encountered its sting over Southern Rhodesia and Aden.

Although the U.N. "Committee of 24," as it is called, is now in recess, it has taken a jaundiced view of military bases in general as vestiges of colonialism. It has recommended liquidation of the big

British base at Aden.

Island bases long have been a planning objective of some U.S. Navy strategists because of the political turmoil affecting base rights in other countries. It is recognized frankly that the only reliable bases for the long run are those not subject to nationalist agitation.

The State Department also has strongly supported an American presence in the Indian Ocean as a political stabilizer. But such a presence often produces an initial outcry, and this has been a factor in the extreme secrecy.

For example, when a small contingent of warships from the Seventh Fleet visited the Indian Ocean early this year in "Operation Concord," there were protests in India even though the single aircraft carrier, two escorts and an oiler did not touch at an Indian port and called only at Aden and Mombasa, Kenya.

Unoccupied Islands Ideal

Ideally any bases built would be situated on uninhabited islands, with British or American nationals brought in to staff them. That procedure would involve fewer political liabilities than any other means of exerting power in the area.

Uninhabited islands are likely to lack harbors or

fresh water, however, and the necessity of providing anchorages or installing distillation plants would greatly increase development costs.

The present survey mission has been conducting an on-the-spot exploration of the islands under consideration most of which were selected from maps and theoretical knowledge, to determine their physical suitability. Previously Americans had rarely visited them.

The objective is to learn which islands could lend themselves to naval anchorages and which could accommodate air landing fields.

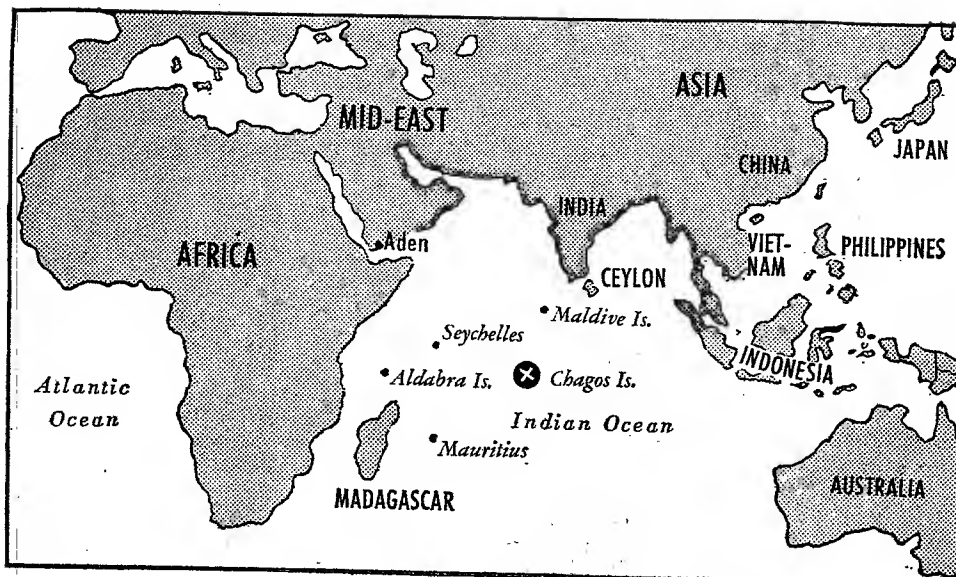
In addition to providing sea and air bases, the islands could be useful as staging points for troops dispatched to carry out Commonwealth responsibilities in Malaysia or SEATO responsibilities in assisting, say, Thailand. Present plans, however do not call for regular troop garrisons.

Aden Base Important

The island project is viewed as a complement rather than alternative to the British base at Aden, which the United States also regards as important for stability in the area.

Britain plans to hold on to Aden as long as this is politically feasible, but many observers think that retention may not be possible beyond five years because of demands that Britain withdraw.

Although the revised constitution of the Federation of South Arabia envisages continuation of the base, political opposition leaders in Aden



Map locates islands being considered by the United States and Great Britain as possible sites for a base in the Indian

Ocean. Chagos Island (X) is believed to be the most likely final choice for the base.

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have called for its eventual abandonment.

President Nasser of Egypt also has renewed his verbal attack on the Aden facility while conceding that use as a staging base would not be in the same category as use for a permanent garrison.

Ships Had Good Effect

Additional facilities also would complement British air bases at Gan and Hulele in the quasi-independent Maldives Islands southwest of Ceylon. The British installations there have been the

subject of some internal controversy in the Maldives.

The visit of American warships in Operation Concord early this year accidentally coincided with the unrest in East Africa after the Zanzibar revolt and is thought to have had a calming effect. Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta in particular is said to have appreciated their call at Mombasa.

Britain has been interested in base development for similar reasons. Not only has she sent sizable numbers of troops to bolster Malaysia

against the challenge from Indonesia, she also responded to the request of three East African countries for military units to quell army mutinies after the Zanzibar revolt.

Although the area east of Suez has been regarded as primarily a British responsibility for peacekeeping purposes, British officials have welcomed the prospect of American participation.

It is possible that some of the long-range projects actually will be joint bases reflecting the closest sort of Anglo-American cooperation, although this has not been definitely decided.

Mutual Use Rights

Alternatively, they might remain under British operation but with full American use rights. Britain and the United States now permit use of each other's bases by ships and aircraft, with monthly exchange of bills.

Diego Garcia, largest of the Oil Islands seven degrees south of the Equator, is legally a dependency of the self-governing colony of Mauritius, 1200 miles southwest.

The 12½ by 6¼-mile island had a population in 1962 of 619, largely transient laborers from Mauritius. Most of these are understood to have left.

Islands in the Chagos Archipelago produce coconuts, copra, guano and salted fish.

The Aldabra Islands near Madagascar, which also have been mentioned, are a dependency of the Seychelles some 700 miles northeast.